SECULARISING SACRED AESTHETIC VALUES

BY ARIEF BUDIMAN

The re-emergence of attention to the Cultural Polemic is an interesting tendency. This Polemic took place before the war on the basis of problematising the orientation of our culture: to the East or to the West? If this question has been revived again now, it shows that we still don't know where we want to direct our cultural values.

Some time ago in the world of literature a debate emerged around what was known as contextual literature. (See Ariel Heryanto: *The* Debate on Contextual Literature, Jakarta, Publisher C.V. Rajawali, 1985). Indonesian literature, which has until now been dominated by the philosophy of the Gelanggang Creed from the 1945 generation, essentially declared the values of literature to be universal. Because of this, Indonesian literature had to align itself to world literature. Contextual literature questions this "conviction." Are literature's values really universal? Or contextual?

In the near future, painters from the *New Indonesian Fine Art Movement,* which was formed some years ago, will hold an *Exhibition of New Fine Art* titled *Pasar Raya* (*Department Store) Fantasy World.* Within the basic philosophies of this exhibition, the existence of two kinds of fine art has been declared; the legitimate and elitist, and the ordinary kind that develops in the arena of the everyday lives of the common people. Legitimate and elitist fine art, which is only shared amongst particular groups in higher social strata, declares fine art other than itself to be other than art. They hold the hegemony over fine art in Indonesia. They have built a large circle which includes artists, critics, collectors, museum networks, books, and formal instutitions. This circle is what eventually confirms the elitist image of fine art as the one and only art. (*See the New Fine Art Exhibition Project 1 brochure, pp 1-2, by Jim Supangkat).*

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This New Indonesian Fine Art Movement wants to criticise this hegemony. They see that an everyday art with its own dynamics is developing outside of this legitimate and elitist art, with its own cheer, and with its own undying vitality. This movement wants to try and understand this, and if they can, learn from it.

All the fluctuations that have taken place recently indicate nostalgia for something that is essential, that is more moving, and closer to our selves. What we have feels uncomfortable, and is unable to reach the niches of our souls. So, these fluctuations are a sign that we have apprehensively begun a search.

Perhaps we in the art world need to return to the most basic questions: what is really meant by aesthetic experience or sensation?

Even now, as far as I know, no one has been able to satisfactorily define what is meant by aesthetic experience. Is it happiness? Or sadness? Or a mystical feeling through which we feel the touch of a world beyond the mortal? Or the feeling we get when we orgasm? Or the nauseous feeling we get when we look at a Dadaist painting that mixes human hair with horse shit? Or a feeling of devotion, like when we listen to a Beethoven symphony? The light-heartedness that comes from watching Oom Pasikom cartoons that hit the mark? Or what?

The revolution of modern art has left all in chaos. In painting, before the impressionists emerged, perhaps we had a kind of consensus about what was beautiful. In Indonesia, this was before Soedjojono attacked the *Mooie Indies* concept of painting. These beautiful paintings are realistic, they mimic nature as Socrates suggested; they are made with strong technical ability enriched by harmonious colours. But after this the impressionist revolution emerged, followed by others like expressionism, cubism, fauvism, surrealism, dadaism, futurism and so on. All of this devastated the certainties that had previously been formed.

What is aesthetics? And what does it give rise to? Nobody knows.

What we do know is that the dominant art in Indonesia has until today been that called universal aesthetics. If aesthetic experience is triggered by the meeting of an art object and a human subject, then the universal aesthetic ideology regards this as the primary factor in prompting the aesthetic experience in the art object.

The basic assumption of this ideology is that there is a structure, an essence or a value in art work, which has the power to stimulate those who encounter it to experience an aesthetic sensation. If in fact this sensation doesn't emerge, then the party at fault is the person involved. Their sensitivity mustn't yet be fine tuned enough to experience this sensation. Hence, he or she needs to be "up-graded."

So, artists who follow the ideology, or paradigm of universal aesthetics, busy themselves in an effort to find a formula that can touch and connect through supernatural power. Successful artists are those who can attain this level.

The aesthetic value they aim for is a transcendental value that conquers space and time. They are outside the historical processes of humankind. Becoming an artist means to attempt to unify one-self with these transcendental values. Consequently, in the act of creating an art work, the artist doesn't need to pay attention to the social environment that surrounds him. There is even a kind of credo that to connect their creations to the community around them is a kind of taboo. The art will be contaminated; art that serves public taste; prostituted, commercial.

Artists, like religion, direct themselves to the highest single value. People who want to enjoy art work must do the same thing, bringing themselves into proximity with this highest value. There is only one value, everywhere and in every time.

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The Universal aesthetics ideology in Indonesia has certainly given birth to an art that is legitimate and elitist, as The New Indonesian Fine Art Movement declared. It has formed a circle of artists-critics-collectors-museum networks-books-formal institutions, to maintain their hegemony. The people below pay little attention to this hegemony, and are merely surprised to see what is being done. But no matter, because the people below are stupid anyway, aren't they? They have poor taste in art.

As a reaction to the universal aesthetic paradigm, the contextual aesthetic paradigm has emerged. Here the aesthetic experience is linked to the shared human experiences of a group within society. This group might be shaped by nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, city or village, and so on. The aesthetic experience of one group may differ from that of another.

For instance, what an African person regards as beautiful might be seen differently by a Chinese person. What moves the wealthy upper-classes may not necessarily move the poor lower classes. And so forth.

Aside from differing between groups, the aesthetic experience might differ at different times. The aesthetic experience of a Javanese in the past is different to teenage Javanese today, for instance in their respect for traditional Javanese music. And so on.

In other words, the contextual aesthetic ideology connects the aesthetic experience to historical developments, where factors of time and space are important. Aesthetic values are processed jointly by real people. They are not transcendental values that exist outside of history; they are values that are in process alongside the history of humankind itself. If we wish to compare, they are like the values of morality, which also change over the course of history, changing locations and changing times. Aesthetic value, in the paradigm of contextual aesthetics, loses its magical and sacred value. What can one do?

From the perspective of contextual aesthetics, there is not one aesthetic value, but many. Theoretically, every group would have its own aesthetic values that differ from those of other groups. The question arises, are there no connections between the values of these many groups? Can one group not value the art works of another group?

At this point, we must differentiate two concepts: global values and universal values. It could well be that several groups experience the same problems. This is of course connected to the limits of technological advance, so that the borders that separate these groups can be erased. What happened in Chernobyl, for example, can become an experience also felt by the majority of the world, or at least those people connected by modern telecommunication technology. Thus a painting, or poetry about the disastrous nuclear energy project, can touch the hearts of many people from many nations, from many groups of people. Values that should be parochial, limited to the people who have directly experienced the Chernobyl disaster, become global values, because they move the hearts of people in other groups.

This is different to universal values, which are transcendental. Here, values are outside of history, outside of the processes of humankind. Technological development does not influence them. The only influential factor is the sophistication of the individual in receiving the signals of the transcendental aesthetic values. Are they capable or incapable?

For the universal perspective, it is clear that the contextual aesthetic is unacceptable. For this ideology, there is only one aesthetic value, and that is uniform, everywhere and wherever. The contextual aesthetic that opposes this thesis is clearly based on a different opinion.

However, in contextual aesthetics there is no problem in accepting the reality that there are artists who create based on their belief that there is a universal aesthetic. It is merely that these artists are placed in a particular context.

These artists, often actually subscribe to the aesthetic criteria that has developed in Western Europe and the United States. The Western aesthetic is regarded to be universal, because it has influenced nearly the entire world. Beethoven, Vincent Van Gogh, Guy de Maupassant, Goethe, Piet Mondrian and many others aside, are artists who are influential in this world, so for those who embrace the universal aesthetic paradigm, the values that they have attained are seen to be universal. For those who embrace the contextual aesthetic paradigm, their values are only global. Their global-ness is connected to the mastery of communications technology that Western countries have achieved, so that they have successfully "dictated" their parochial values throughout the world. Thus the big circle that the New Fine Art Movement identified, which comprises artists-critics-collectors-etc, controls opinion regarding which aesthetic values are seen as authentic.

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Artists who subscribe to the universal aesthetic paradigm create in the context of this bigger world circle. They are unified with this world community, and they ignore the environment around them. They have become what the Gelanggang Creed described as the legitimate heirs to world culture.

What is offered by the contextual literature and the New Fine Art Movement? For me, it offers something very important; an invitation to return to the reality around us. It is also an invitation to democratise our attitudes towards the value of art, by acknowledging that different groups have different values, which are equal to our own values. It is an invitation to acknowledge that essentially artistic vales are not singular, but plural.

What the New Fine Art Movement has done is not limited to influencing art alone. Because what they are struggling for is a kind of cultural position, that will influence not only other branches of the arts, but also the cultural lives of this nation, including its political and economic orientation.

Thus, it can also be said to provide an alternative answer to the crisis that occurred in the Cultural Polemic, that is the choice between Eastern or Western values. The alternative answer is this: let us look around us with humble hearts, and try to understand our environment and learn from it.